

Mountain Home
strongly supports
its Airmen and is
proud to be

An Air Force Town

by Louis A. Arana-Barradas
photos by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

As she took a bite of her barbecue beef sandwich, Dorothy Tennant closed her big blue eyes and let out a slow “Mmm.” Some of the tangy sauce oozed on her hands. But she didn’t let any drip onto the sleeve of her black leather jacket.

Around her, hundreds of people were also enjoying barbecue beef sandwiches and corn on the cob. The food was free this day at Mountain Home, Idaho’s, Carl Miller Park.

“This is real good barbecue,” she said, and then took another big bite.

Two older gents, dressed in leather biker regalia, flanked her at the picnic table, “chowing” down. Hell’s Angels they weren’t. But emblazoned on the back of their leather jackets were the “colors” of the Idaho Motorcycle Club.

The trio, all in their late 50s, ride for leisure and travel, not mayhem. And they weren’t locals. They rode into town from Magic Valley — as they have for several years — to ride in the town’s annual Air Force Appreciation Day parade. For the past 44 years, the two-day event in September is how the town shows its appreciation to the Airmen at Mountain Home Air Force Base. It’s the town’s biggest annual hoopla. And town officials say it’s the state’s biggest parade.

“The Airmen at the base are a good bunch of people,” Ms. Tennant said. “They’re not strangers here. I support them, and so does this community.”

She’s not kidding. Just about every one of Mountain Home’s more than 11,000 citizens showed up for the parade, and barbecue that followed. And like Ms. Tennant, many people came from out of town to show their support, some from as far away as Oregon.

For a few hours, more than a hundred floats — many from the base — paraded down the town’s main street: American Legion Boulevard. People on the floats tossed candy to the children along the route. Bands played patriotic songs. And the grand marshal, the base’s 366th Fighter Wing commander, got out at the reviewing stand.

“This celebration is how we say thanks to the base and its people for what they do for our country and for



being an important part of our community,” said Jerry Rost, the chamber of commerce military affairs committee member. “We’re partners.”

From sheep to jets

Because as the fortunes of the base go, so do those of the town, Mountain Home Mayor Joe B. McNeal said. And that, he said, makes Mountain Home the quintessential military town.

“This is an Air Force town, and we’re proud of it,” said the mayor, an Air Force retiree.

The town, 36 miles southeast of Boise, was once a busy sheep wool shipping station. But it was the

opening of the base in November 1942 that secured its future. Life has revolved around the base ever since. Most town residents are retired from the Air Force, work at the base or help support it in some way, Mayor McNeal said.

“Mountain Home people love America,” he said. “And they love the Air Force.”

Over the years, Airmen who have retired in town continue to support the new Airmen at the base, located in the high desert 10 miles west of town. It’s a never-ending cycle, and the goodwill continues today. There are signs of that support anywhere

one goes. Nearly every business offers military discounts. Marquees welcome Airmen home from deployments. And military spouses are a large part of the town’s workforce.

It’s the open-arms welcome Mountain Home gives Airmen that makes it a great place to live, said Randy Valley, an Air Force retiree and Air Force Appreciation Day committee chairman.

“I stayed because this town provides the best support to the military of anyplace I’ve ever lived,” he said. “Plus, it’s got good weather. And it’s a great place to raise a family.”

For example, some people don’t

The parade down main street, American Legion Blvd., is the highlight of Air Force Appreciation Day at Mountain Home, Idaho. Nearly the entire town lines the street to show its support for the Airmen.

lock their doors at night. Bikes left in front yards will be there in the morning. There’s no smog or traffic. Negligible crime. The roar of the base’s jets is seldom heard. And the “great outdoors” starts at the town limits. It’s small-town life at its best.

These reasons are why Master Sgt. John Lawicki and his wife, Kim, have homesteaded there for 10 years. The family lives in town, and most of their neighbors are Airmen. A 366th

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For additional details, go to: www.mountainhome.af.mil; www.afcrossroads.com; www.ci.mountainhome.id.us; <http://www.idahofitness.com/ski-idaho.htm>

The day officially starts with a cornhusking competition at Mountain Home's Carl Miller Park. It's the town's version of "shuck and awe," one participant said. Master Sgt. Courtney Hiller (left) and Master Sgt. Ed Van Eten helped shuck the corn that people would eat at the event's second-day barbecue.



Security Forces Squadron flight chief, Sergeant Lawicki said what appeals to him is the pace in Mountain Home, which is calm enough that he and his family can enjoy their life more.

But not everyone likes the laidback lifestyle, which can be tough on young Airmen, he said.

"Fun and excitement won't go knocking at your dormitory door," he said. "So you find it."

That's exactly what 19-year-old Airman 1st Class Chris Sears found out. After the long drive from Boise, he felt banished to the wilderness. He wondered about the next four years.

"It was horrible, at first," the 366th Services Squadron troop said. "But the people here are so friendly, and the base tries so hard to keep you busy and active."

He adapted and after a few months rediscovered his love of the outdoors and camping. Making friends and doing "outdoorsy" stuff helped erase the first impression.

"I like the base now," he said. "There's a lot to do."

Most people grow to love Mountain Home, Mr. Valley said, "because of

the people." He should know. He saw his wife cry for only the second time in her life when they drove into town. She didn't want to plant roots. "Now she'd cry if we had to leave," he said.

The bond between the people on both sides of the base gate makes Mountain Home the robust Air Force town it is, Mrs. Lawicki said.

"There's great camaraderie here," she said. "And it didn't take a tragedy like 9-11 to build the relationship, for this town to support the base. That support has existed for a very long time."

When the Air Force Appreciation Day celebration ended, Mountain Home returned to its serene existence. Some people carried foil-wrapped plates of barbecue to the few neighbors who didn't show for the festivities. Ms. Tennant and her biker buddies mounted up and headed home.

"I'll be back next year," she said. "You can count on that."

By early next morning, not a scrap of paper littered the parade route. Mountain Home had returned to being the small town that makes Airmen feel at home. ☺

The high desert is the base's back yard. It's home to a cannibalistic ground squirrel the locals call a "whistle pig" and desert flora and fauna. But its jaw-dropping sunset views are what locals say is best about the desert.



Town Mayor Joe B. McNeal told Airmen they are depended on to "protect the nation as a shepherd does his flock."

Mountain Home at a Glance

Mission: Home of 366th Fighter Wing "Gunfighters" and the Air Warfare Battlelab, the wing flies F-15C Eagles, F-15E Strike Eagles and F-16CJ Fighting Falcons. The wing's mission is to "develop and nurture Airmen, prepared to deploy and ready to fight."

Location: Town of Mountain

Home is 36 miles from Boise, and the base is another 10 miles from there. Between Boise and Mountain Home are Mayfield and Orchard. Southeast of Mountain Home are Hammett, Glens Ferry and Bliss; south are Brunau and Hot Springs.

Getting around: By road: A straight shot on Interstate Highway 84 southeast from Boise — City of Trees — to the town of Mountain Home. Then it's a 10-mile drive on State Highway 67 from the town to the base.

By air: Boise Air Terminal is the only airport around; on Highway 84. **Population:** The base has about 4,400 Airmen, 825 civilian workers and 6,500 family members. The town of Mountain Home: a bit more than 11,000 inhabitants.

History: Mountain Home began as an Army airfield in November 1942, and officially opened in August 1943. Airmen began arriving right away, training for B-24 duty in World War II. Several bomb groups occupied the

field during the war. After the war, the base went inactive, until the Air Force returned with reconnaissance units and renamed the installation Mountain Home Air Force Base. There have been special operations, bomber, missile and reconnaissance missions at the base over the years. The base received its first fighters in 1966. It has been a fighter base ever since.

Climate: Locals say Mountain Home has a "quite pleasant" year-round climate. But it's windy. Average annual

temperature is about 65 degrees. July is the hottest month, with a 93 degree average, but the summer average is 85 degrees. January temperatures drop into the high teens, but winter average is 36 degrees. Annual rainfall is about 10 inches; snowfall about 10.9 inches.

Cost of living: Cheap by big city standards. Rents for homes range from \$375-\$425 for a one-bedroom to \$700-\$900 for a four-bedroom house. Apartments range from \$375-\$425 for

a one-bedroom to \$550-\$750 for a four bedroom.

Recreation: Just name it. There's plenty of outdoor stuff to do all year: camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain climbing, biking, skiing, snowboarding, water sports — whew. Plus, there are numerous state and national parks near the base, old ghost towns and historical and natural landmarks. Nearby are mountains, rivers, canyons and even sand dunes.